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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000075

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SUBJECT: LESOTHO ELECTION COMMISSION SPEAKS ON EVE OF ELECTION

REF: A) MASERU 0060 AND PREVIOUS

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11. SUMMARY: As Lesotho approaches polling for the National Assembly election on February 17, Lesotho's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has consistently stated that it is prepared for polling day. Ballot papers are printed and are in place or being transported by road or helicopter to the nation's ten districts for distribution to Lesotho's 80 electoral constituencies and 2,558 polling stations. In a February 15 meeting hosted by the IEC, attended by development partners and political leaders, the IEC Chairman introduced a local auditing consortium which has been hired to audit the elections and build confidence in its results. Other issues discussed included the difficulties faced by voters during the February 13 advance voting period and inter-party alliances. U.S. Ambassador June Carter Perry led the development partners in appealing to political leaders to foster a peaceful acceptance of election results and to address "timing" issues related to voting in districts. END SUMMARY.

Auditing the IEC

12. In his opening remarks, IEC Chairman Leshele Thoahlane indicated that the IEC had hired a consortium of local firms to audit the election to enhance its credibility. Alphonce Bohloa, the Executive Director of the consortium, stated that his group's task was to ensure the accuracy and transparency of the election. He emphasized that the role of his firm is to ensure that the IEC complies with its own procedures, not to perform a forensic audit. He pointed out that his consortium has already recruited Audit Assistants who will be deployed in all 80 constituencies with audit reports made public on February 20.

Advance Voting Problems

13. On February 14, advance (early) voters cast their votes for the national election. Only categories of citizens with special

duties on Election Day are legally permitted to vote in advance (government officials, local observers, policemen, soldiers, the media, doctors, and Lesotho's diplomats abroad). As witnessed by Embassy Maseru's FSNs who participated in advance voting, proceedings were characterized by disorganization. Three out of 20 U.S. Embassy FSNs were not permitted to cast advanced ballots as their names were not on the advance voting registry. The local wire service described the event in an article under the headline, "Advance Voting in Shambles". Some voters, especially a large number of police officers, found that their names did not appear on the advance voters' list and were not allowed to participate in advance balloting. For many voters, including Embassy staff, it took six to eight hours of waiting in line to cast a vote. The IEC Chair identified the Maseru city constituency as a "special case". He did not anticipate such problems in provincial areas.

Controversial Inter-party Alliances

¶4. Also discussed at the February 15 IEC meeting was the formulation of party alliances - a significant feature of the 2007 general election. Lesotho's presumptive two leading parties, the governing LCD and opposition ABC, both do not appear on the ballot for the 40 Proportional Representation seats out of 120 total parliamentary seats. Both parties are gambling that they will gain enough of the 80 direct constituency-elected seats as to preclude them from needing any of the 40 Proportional Representation seats under Lesotho's Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) formula.

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¶5. This is a new phenomenon in Lesotho's politics. The LCD forged an alliance with a small party, the National Independence Party (NIP). Controversy has dogged the alliance since it was first announced, as the elderly leader of the party has charged that the alliance was formed without his knowledge or blessing. He successfully contested the alliance in Lesotho's High Court, but subsequently lost the case on appeal. (NOTE: There is possibly some discrepancy in the interpretation of the High Court's prerogative. END NOTE.)

¶6. The All Basotho Convention (ABC) formed its own alliance with the Lesotho Workers Party (LWP), while the Lesotho People's Congress (LPC) has merged with the Basotholand African Congress (BAC) to form the Alliance of Congress Parties (ACP). These political strategies are based on the risky assumption that voters know which smaller party is the LCD or ABC "surrogate" on the Proportional Representation party list. Many voters are likely unaware of the "gentlemen's agreements" between these large and small parties.

Development Partners Appeal for Peace

¶7. Also at the meeting, Ambassador Perry led other development partners in appealing to political leaders to observe the

electoral code of conduct and discourage their supporters from engaging in intimidation or violence. Generally, Lesotho's political party leadership has been cooperative as election excitement and anticipation increases on the eve of polling day.

ABC Leader Thomas Thabane indicated that his party wants peaceful elections and that he has urged his followers to accept election results regardless of the outcome. The IEC Chairman thanked the Ambassadors of the U.S., EU, and Ireland for their contributions to the advancement of democracy.

"Tense But Stable"

18. COMMENT: Lesotho's police force has declared the situation in the country to be "tense but stable", and post concurs with this assessment. The IEC will broadcast election results live on nationwide radio beginning on February 17. We expect that the first results will begin streaming in on Sunday morning following polling day. Maseru's Convention Center, which will serve as the National Electoral Results Center, is expected to be a hub of activity in the days following the election. As Embassy Maseru's first three election monitoring teams are already on the road to Lesotho's hinterlands and another eight teams depart at sunrise on polling day, post will have its finger on Lesotho's political pulse as this weekend's events unfold.

PERRYJC